

REVIEW OF *PATTERNS AND MEANINGS: USING CORPORA FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE RESEARCH AND TEACHING*

Patterns and Meanings: Using Corpora for English Language Research and Teaching

Alan Partington

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Reviewed by József Horváth, University of Pécs

Patterns and Meanings: Using Corpora for English Language Research and Teaching, Partington's slim but thorough monograph, is a welcome contribution to the field of corpus linguistics. It illustrates how using computer corpora in the study of language phenomena can enhance the internal validity and reliability of linguistic findings. The volume (the second in the *Studies in Corpus Linguistics* series) represents an example of the uses of corpora for practical purposes, following, in part, the paradigm established by Johns (1991) and Leech (1997): to exploit corpora for language teaching and learning.

Partington, together with colleagues, assembled an unannotated corpus of 5 million words of journalistic texts for the case studies at the University of Bologna. The English component of the corpus was derived from *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times*, with what the author calls the "sister" subcorpus accessed from an Italian broadsheet, *Il Sole 24 Ore*. Two heavy-weight concordancers, *Microconcord* (Scott & Johns, 1993) and *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 1996, [reviewed in this issue](#)), were used for the analyses.

The eight chapters of *Patterns and Meanings* report on what the author labels case studies, addressing different levels or aspects of language use. The coverage is broad: discussions of collocation, translation, connotation, syntax, cohesion, metaphor, and phraseology signify the main stages of the effort, each of which combines "language description with suggestions for pedagogical application" (p. 1). The style and presentation are superb, with only a few slips and minor typos (such as the one on p. 63, "the number of wholly reliable true friends ... is *probable* fewer than is ... imagined"). The author ties in his observations with a useful and clearly presented review of the literature, which presents some contrasting views. Further, the reader is given a concrete description of the methods, procedures, and techniques applied in the analyses. In the concluding sections of most chapters, Partington charts directions for further study, and frequently offers useful and original tips for both teachers and students in corpus linguistics courses.

As the intended audience of the volume includes newcomers to the field of corpus linguistics, the Introduction defines most basic terms and issues, referring mainly to studies from the 1990s. Special emphasis is given to areas where the application of corpus linguistics in language pedagogy can plug the gap that some practitioners perceive between theory and practice, and between teaching and learning. It

includes a relevant description of the data-driven learning (DDL) approach as well as details about the corpus for the studies and the methods applied. To ensure that the following chapters are accessible to all readers, there is also a brief illustrative section on the keyword-in-context (KWIC) concordance output, a description of the sorting features of concordance programs, and a technical how-to for dealing with corpus files on a computer.

In the first three chapters ("Collocation and Phrase Patterns," "Collocation and Synonymy," and "True and False Friends") the focus is on lexical issues. The author gives a splendid introduction to how concordance samples can enhance our understanding of denotation and contrasts data from the corpus with information from dictionaries to highlight the interaction of collocation, text types, and stylistic variations. The definitions are solid, and the examples carefully selected. Furthermore, principles underlying the phenomena are always explained clearly, assisting the reader in discovering the significance of the findings. Especially revealing is the study of collocation and synonymy (chapter 2), in which one of the problems that many EFL learners and professional translators face is tackled: choosing among seemingly similar vocabulary items. Partington provides a detailed study of the collocates of the adjectives *sheer*, *pure*, *complete*, and *absolute*, as he investigates the many different lexical choice patterns, making this part of the book a commendable resource aiding translation theory and practice.

Although the approach and the findings of chapter 2 are valid, I have difficulty seeing the relevance to Partington's claim in the conclusion that a thesaurus "is positively dangerous for the non-native speaker." For one thing, the use of the term "non-native speaker" is problematic. We all *are* native speakers of one language or another. The author may be alluding to the dichotomy of the L1 and L2 speaker, and the point he is making appears to be that, because of the intricacies of collocation and synonymy, the use of a thesaurus may result in strange, non-native-like language. Does this suggest, then, that Partington would not sanction the use of the thesaurus in any EFL course? Whether or not Partington would go this far, the claim appears to be based on a limited view of both the foreign language learner and the pedagogical context of using a thesaurus. Students *can* learn how to use a thesaurus for specific purposes, the same way as they learn to use a dictionary -- either traditional or corpus-based. Also, suggesting that thesauruses represent a danger raises the issue of equal linguistic rights, to which learners are entitled as much as native speakers. It would be interesting to conduct an empirical comparison of the naturalness of the writing of learners who used a thesaurus and those who did not for a given writing task. In addition, learner use of a thesaurus during DDL work may result in improvement in range and appropriateness of vocabulary, making this another area worthy of empirical research.

Chapter 4 continues the exploration of the corpus by examining connotation in terms of semantic prosody: It investigates the connotational significance of lexis. Definitions and examples were extracted from 10 dictionaries, both traditional and corpus-based, so that the corpus findings could be contrasted with how the lexical and connotational features of *set in*, *peddle*, and *dealings* are presented in the two groups of dictionaries. Partington notes that even current non-learner dictionaries have little place for information of this kind (p. 72) and suggests that cross-linguistic prosodic differences require further study, which will be especially beneficial in terms of raising translators' awareness of them.

Chapters 5 and 6 ("Syntax" and "Cohesion in Text") serve two purposes: first, to identify further features of patterns and meanings; second, to demonstrate that with a corpus one can go beyond the lexical domain and look at other chunks of text. It is also here that the author makes his theoretical position explicit: He belongs to the school that investigates "the interface between lexis and syntax" (p. 79). Partington refers to Francis's claim that the lexical and the syntactic domains are mutually dependent on each other: "It is impossible to look at one independently of the other The interdependence of syntax and lexis is such that they are ultimately inseparable" (1993, p. 147). Partington's analysis reveals that what is taught about conditionals, for example, is not always what the corpus attests. At one point (p. 84), he suggests that when students can review and analyze a large number of concordance citations for "If," they may realize that what underlies the syntax of conditionals is best viewed as a model, rather than a constraint. By

analyzing the corpus, Partington reveals and groups conditional and non-conditional dependencies in *if* constructions, and suggests that similar investigations could be carried out on other conditional markers and subordinators. He also states that this DDL approach can help students "more clearly understand the distinctions highlighted in grammars and textbooks" (p. 87). Unfortunately, however, there are no concrete tips on the format and content of this procedure, although many readers may have found such a practical element interesting.

"Metaphor" and "Unusuality" come toward the end of the book (chapters 7 and 8). The former applies frequency and concordance data drawn from the business journalism section of the English corpus (about 800,000 words from *The Independent* and *The Times*), the latter undertakes to highlight not the typical, but the figurative, in language. In chapter 7, the author first provides a succinct summary of three theories of metaphor, and then analyzes dead and dying metaphors, metaphorical intent, collocation, and fossilized collocations. In chapter 8, he presents unusual newspaper headlines from five sections of *The Independent*: home news, international news, arts, business, and sports. Clearly, headline language is text that many EFL students will *skim*. Here we get a *scanning* of this sample: The focus is on preconstructed word strings (proverbs, quotations, expressions, and the like). The list of headlines assembled is a rich resource: examples such as "Prints Charming," "Sail of the Quincentenary," "You Could Hear A Superlative Drop," and "Industrial Resolution" are just four of the scores of examples that have been classified and interpreted by the author (and his associates). In addition to presenting examples of collocational patterns, Partington shares his view of the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic nature of these journalistic chunks.

The concluding chapter addresses some of the limitations of corpus-based studies, with Partington synthesizing the most common critiques leveled against the approach. Issues discussed include the difficulty of establishing external validity of corpus-based studies, which results from the fact that any findings can be interpreted only within the context of the given corpus. It seems, however, that the theoretical dilemmas of representativity would have been better placed, and more thoroughly analyzed, in an earlier section, before the case studies. This would have helped readers new to the field keep the limitation in mind. That Partington chose to feature this subject at the end of the book suggests that he had found no easy answer to a question of corpus linguistics: Why bother analyzing any corpus, however large, if what is found can be claimed to characterize only one single corpus? For the time being, one needs to be content with exploring general and specialized corpora assembled using clear principles and be cautious in drawing conclusions from such studies (Clear, 1992).

Overall, Partington's richly illustrated studies, the relevance of research questions to language pedagogy, and the new knowledge that this volume offers, especially about collocation, synonymy, phraseology, and unusual language, make *Patterns and Meanings* a very well focused and engaging read, one that has already found its way into several corpus linguistics courses worldwide -- rightfully so.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

József Horváth holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Pécs (Hungary). He has developed the JPU Corpus, a collection of over 400,000 words of Hungarian EFL students' writing. He teaches Writing and Research Skills, Corpus Linguistics, and Translation Studies courses at the Department of English Applied Linguistics, University of Pécs

E-mail: joe@btk.pte.hu

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